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Aoki et al.

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(54) **WAGERING GAME WITH INCREMENTAL UNLOCKING OF CONTENT**

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G07F 17/32 (2006.01)
G07F 17/34 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC ***G07F 17/3258*** (2013.01); ***G07F 17/3262*** (2013.01); ***G07F 17/3267*** (2013.01); ***G07F 17/34*** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC G07F 17/3258
See application file for complete search history.

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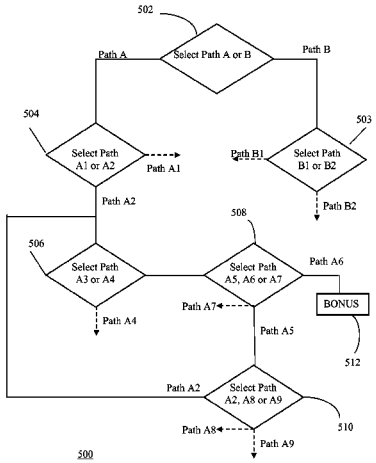
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A gaming system includes a credit detector adapted to detect a wager to play a wagering game, one or more displays adapted to display, in response to the wager, a base game and a secondary game, the base game providing a trigger that provides an opportunity to play the secondary game, the secondary game including a plurality of decision points, each decision point requiring a selection of one of a plurality of paths and a controller operative to respond to the selection of the path at the one decision point and provide a next decision point for a subsequent selection of another path, a state of the secondary game remaining persistent during repeated plays of the base game so that selected paths in the secondary game are combined to provide non-linear unlocking of a bonus award.

10 Claims, 9 Drawing Sheets



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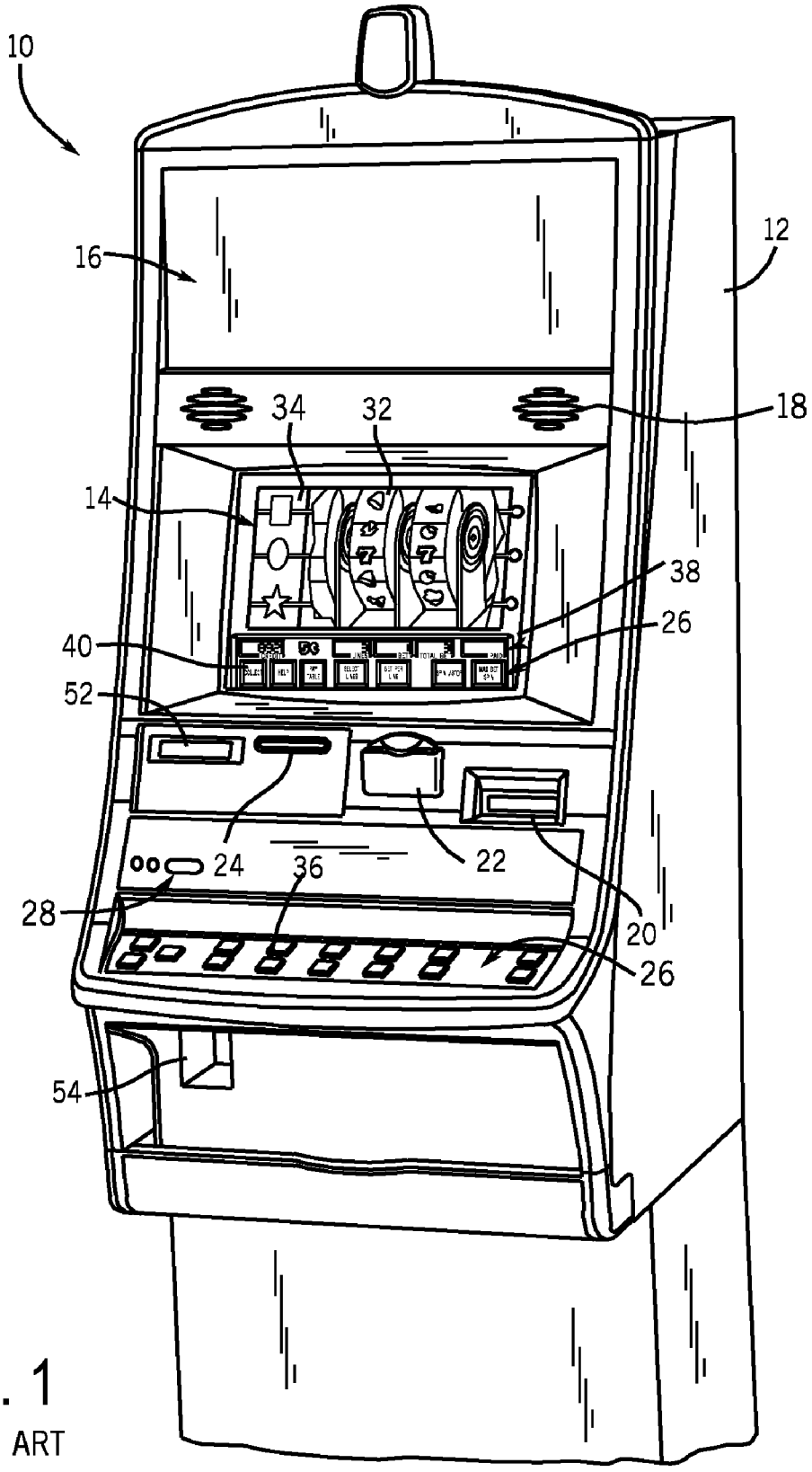
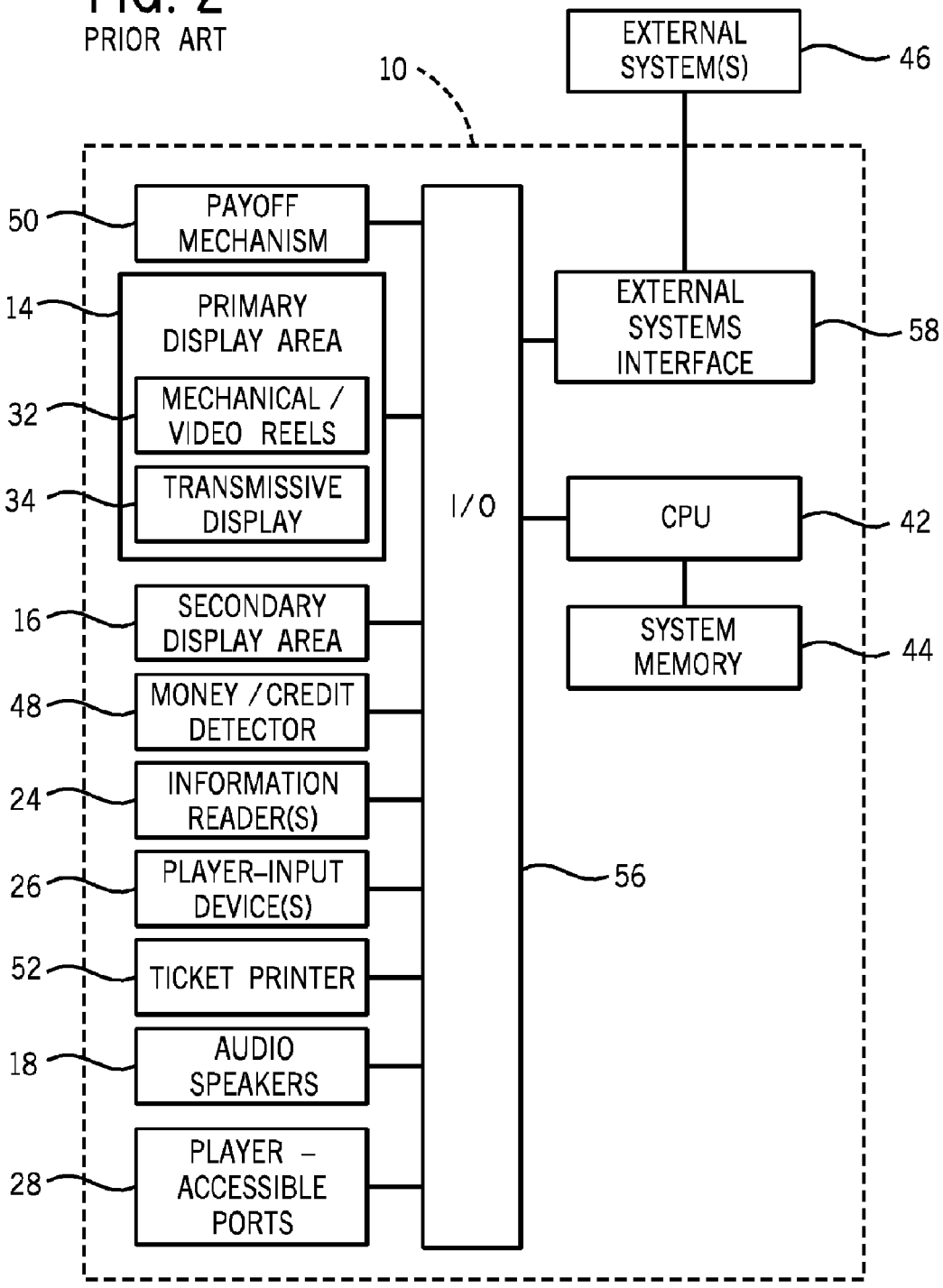


FIG. 1
PRIOR ART

FIG. 2
PRIOR ART



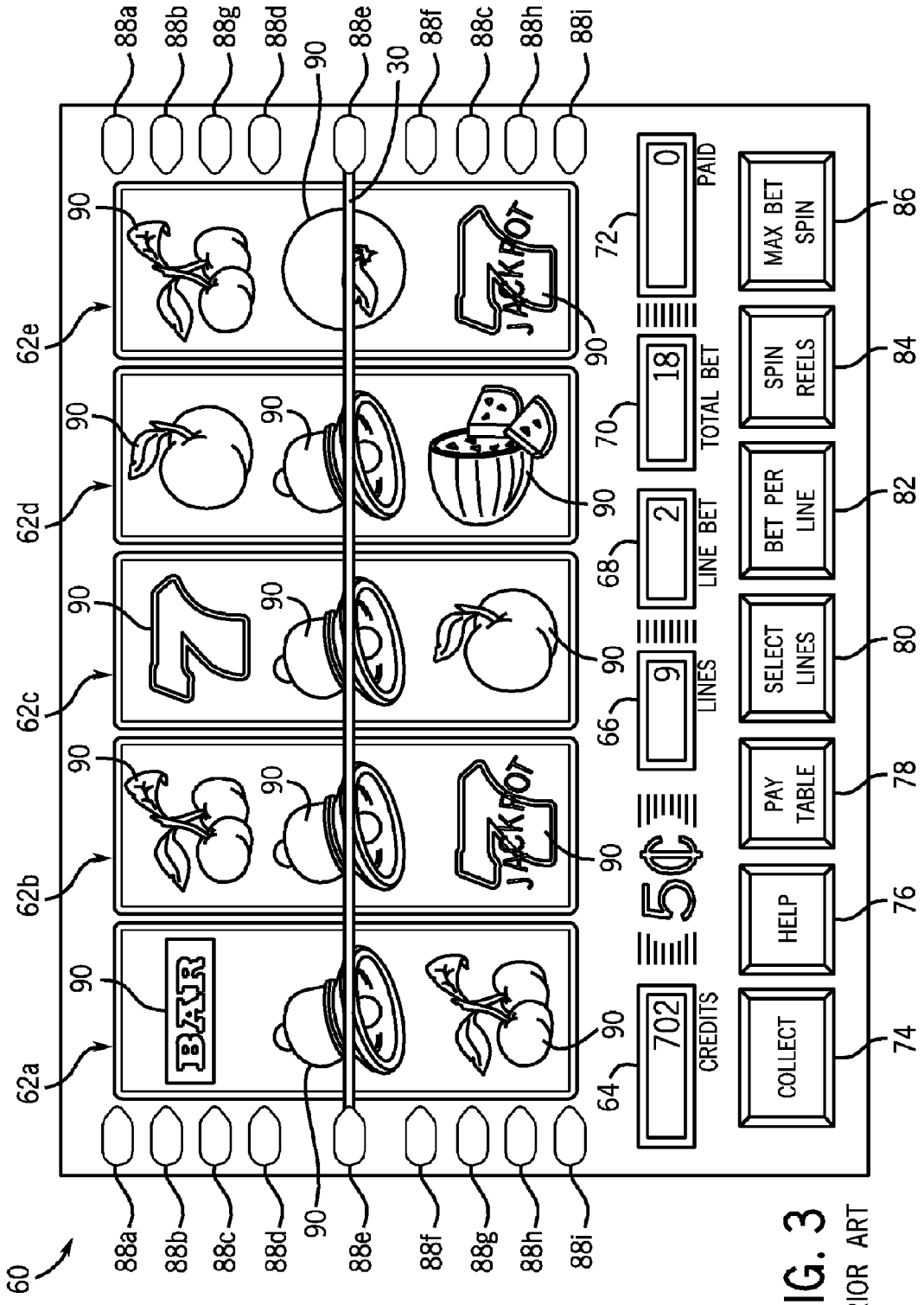
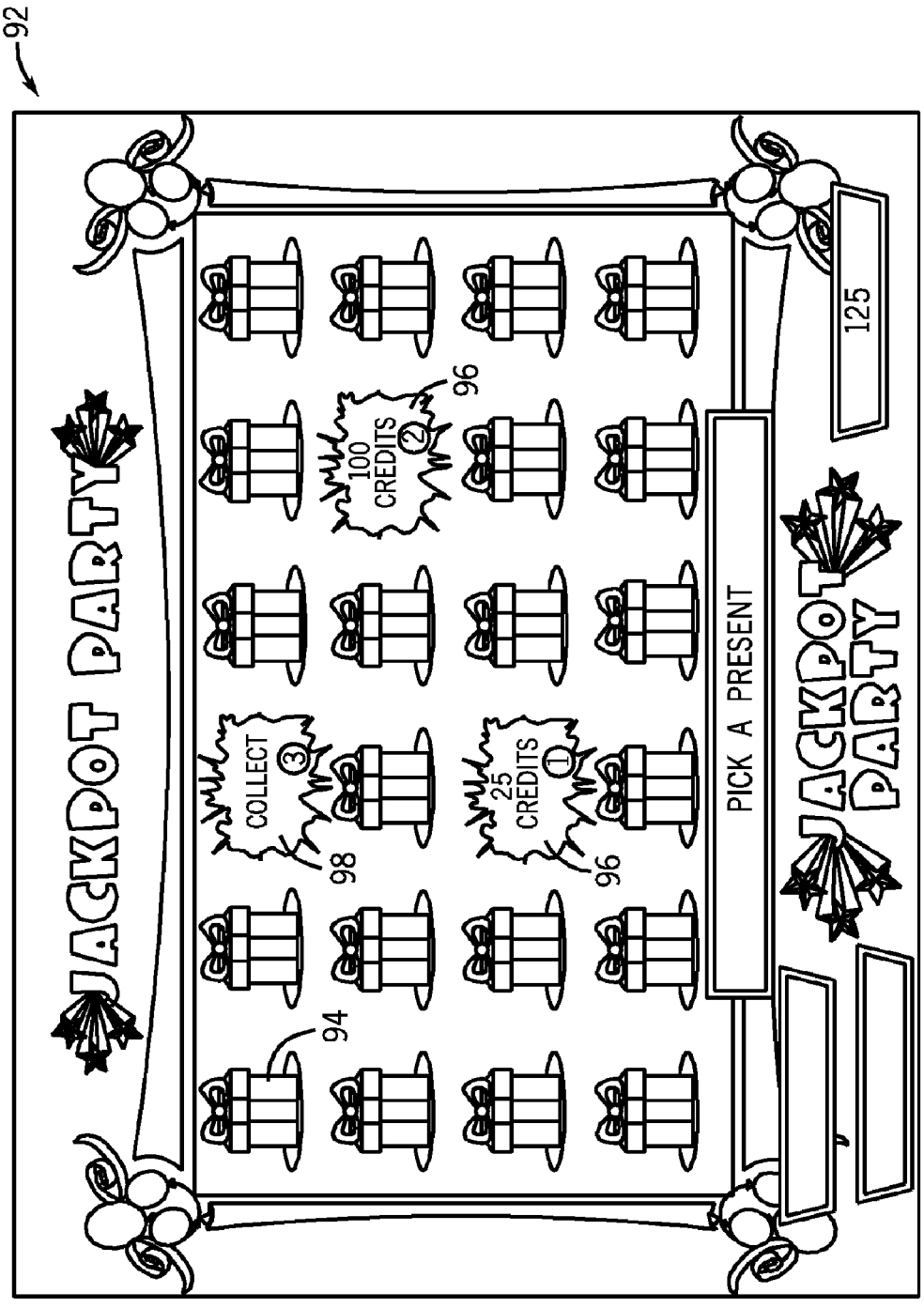


FIG. 3
PRIOR ART



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PRIOR ART

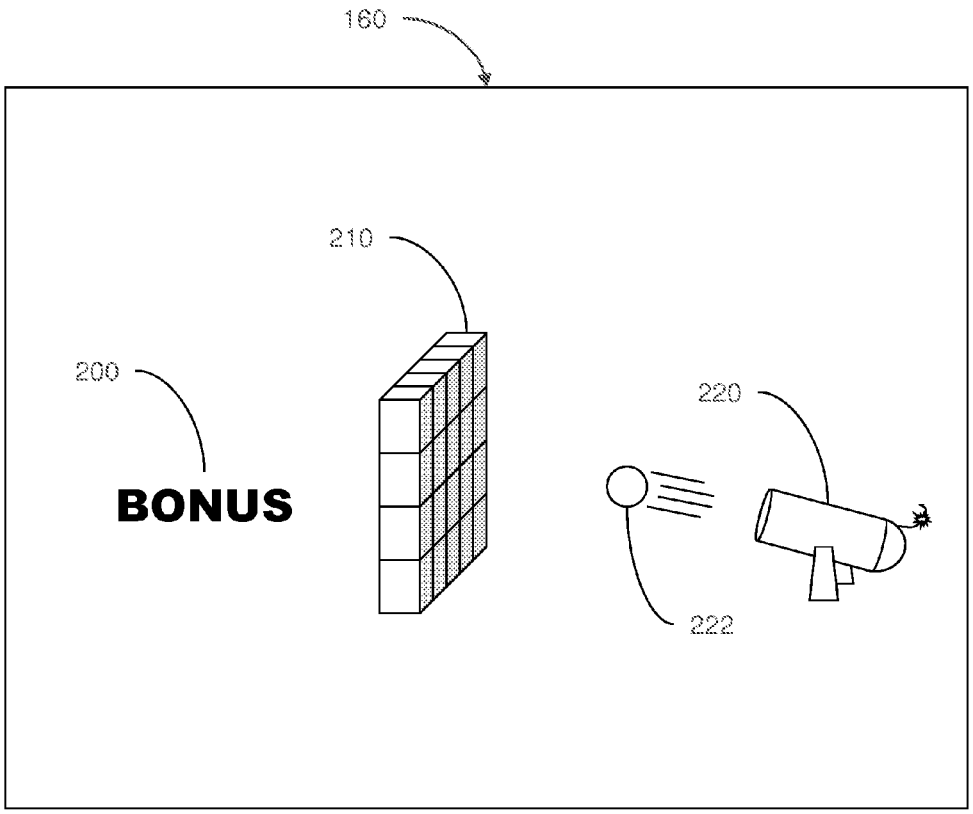
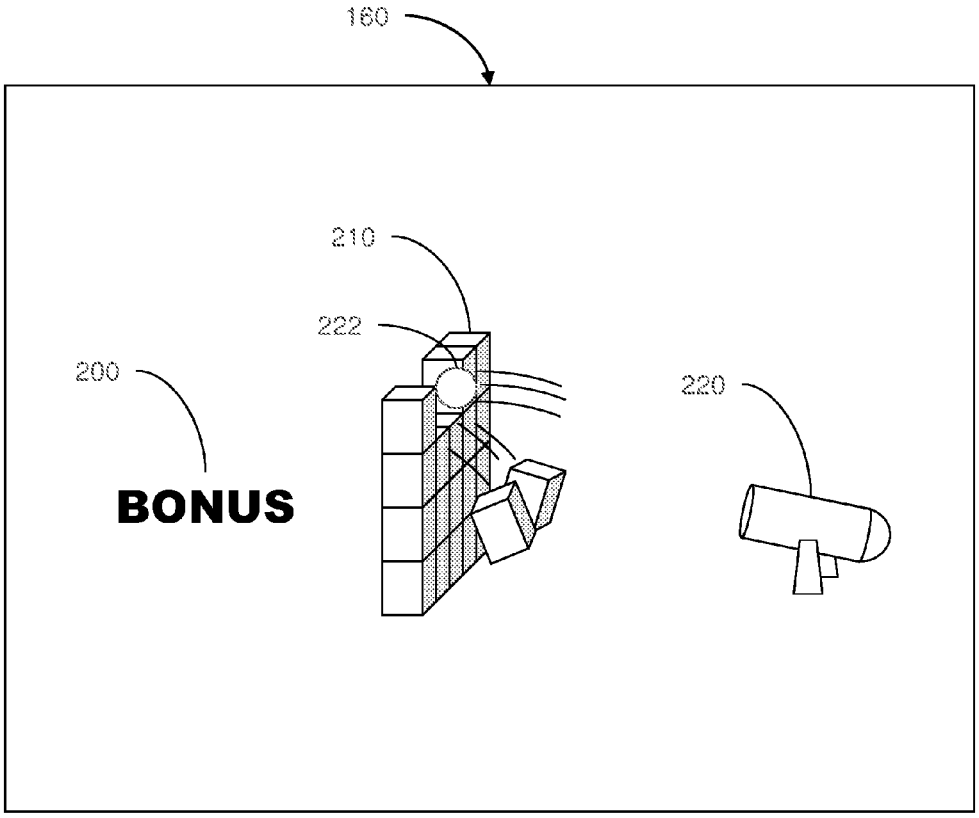


FIG. 5



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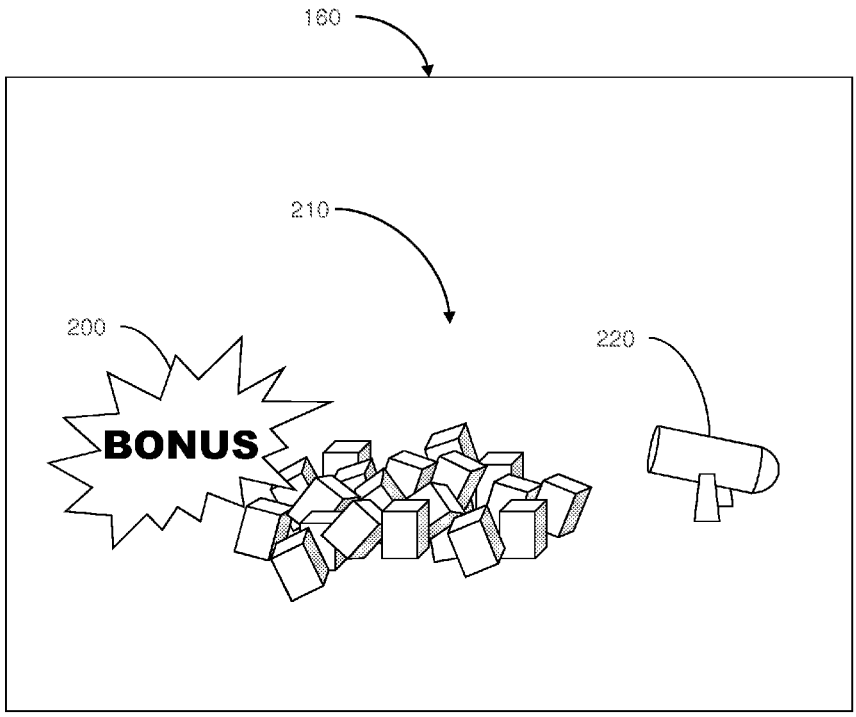

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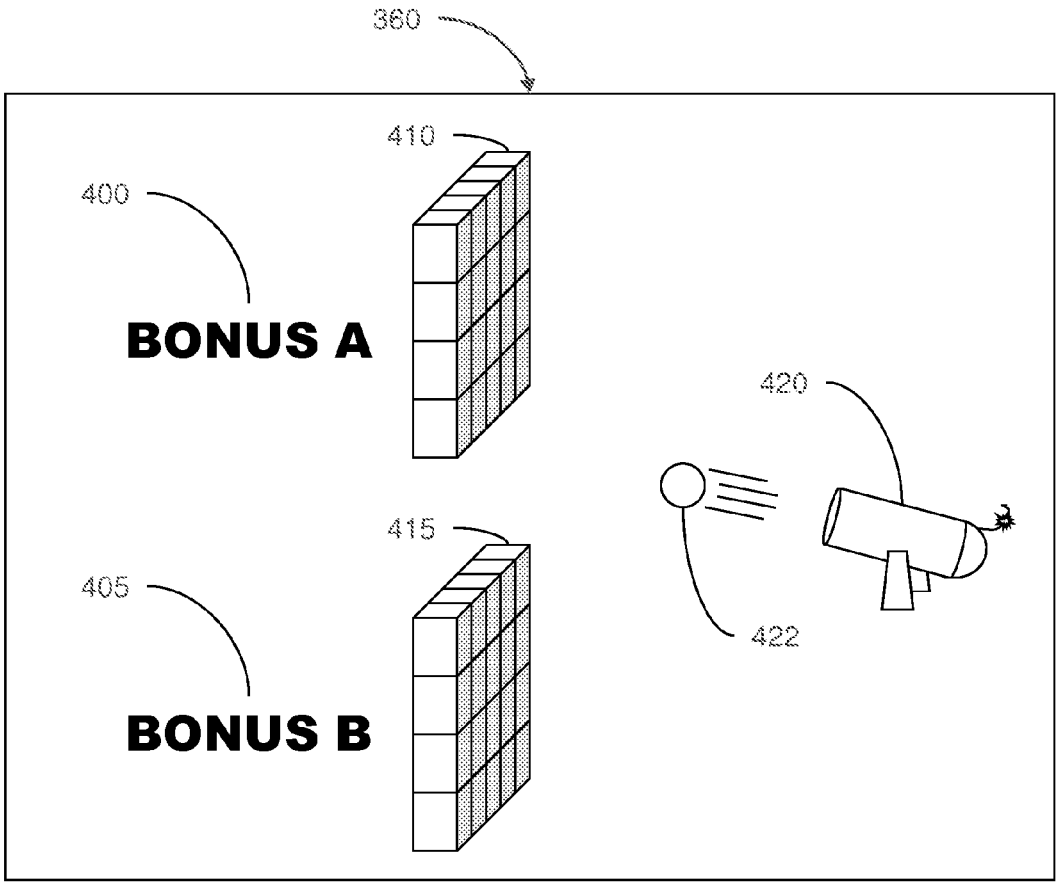
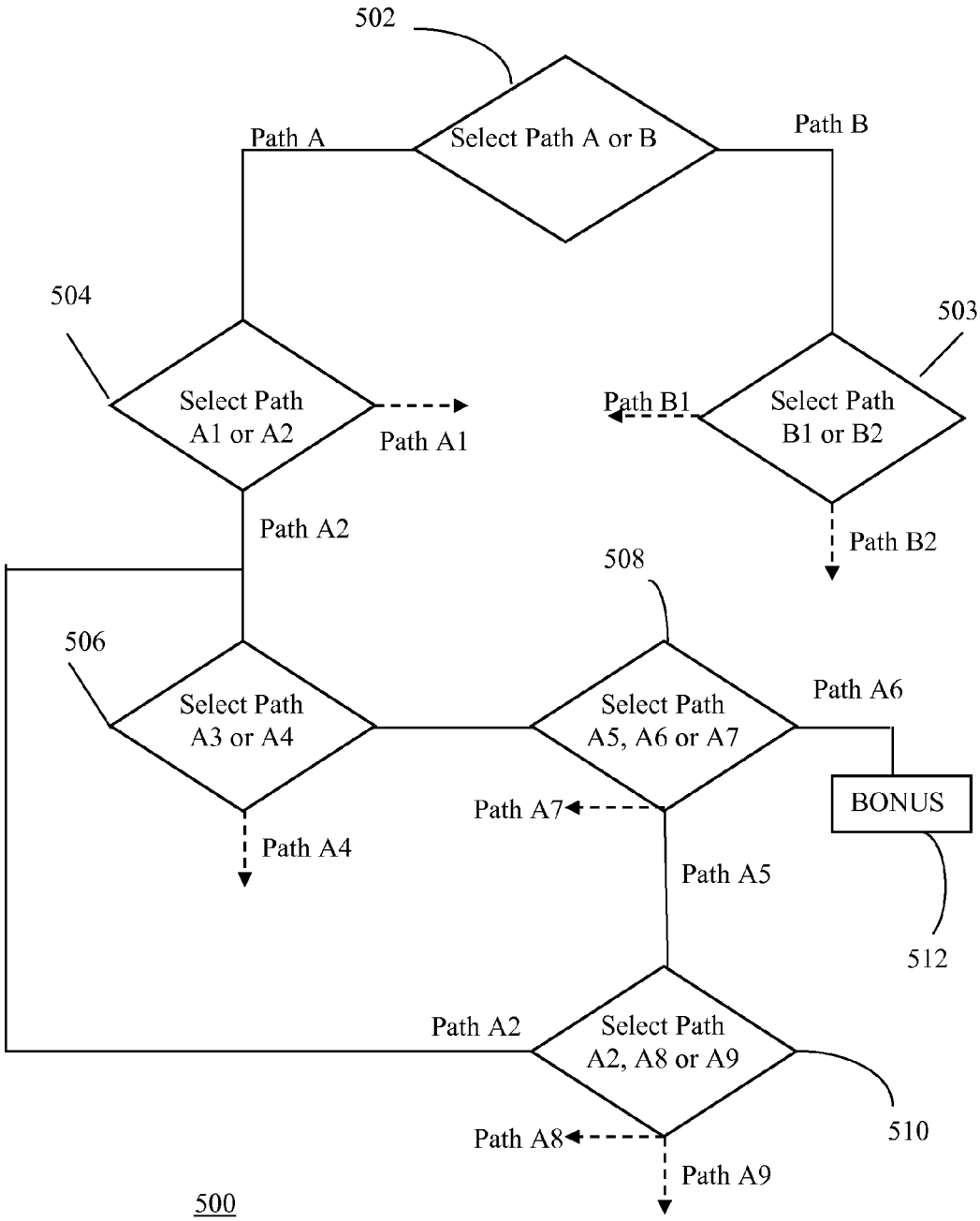


FIG. 8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Select Path A or B
Path A
Path B
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Select Path A1 or A2
Path A1
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Path B1
Select Path B1 or B2
Path B2
Path A2
508
506
Select Path A3 or A4
Select Path A5, A6 or A7
Path A6
BONUS
Path A7
Path A4
Path A5
512
Path A2
Select Path A2, A8 or A9
510
Path A8
Path A9
500

FIG. 9

WAGERING GAME WITH INCREMENTAL UNLOCKING OF CONTENT

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is related to and claims priority to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 61/413,373, filed Nov. 12, 2010, and titled "Wagering Game with Incremental Unlocking of Content," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to a gaming apparatus, and methods for playing wagering games, and more particularly, to wagering games in which a player incrementally unlocks a bonus or other content while playing the wagering game.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Gaming terminals, such as slot machines, video poker machines and the like, have been a cornerstone of the gaming industry for several years. Generally, the popularity of such machines with players is dependent on the likelihood (or perceived likelihood) of winning money at the machine and the intrinsic entertainment value of the machine relative to other available gaming options. In some wagering games, the likelihood of winning money is enhanced by providing the player with an opportunity to play a bonus game that may provide an additional winning outcome.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to aspects of the present invention, a player incrementally unlocks a bonus or other content while playing a wagering game.

In one example embodiment, a gaming system displays a base game and a secondary game. The base game provides a trigger that provides an opportunity to play the secondary game. The secondary game includes a plurality of decision points, each decision point requiring a selection of one of a plurality of paths. A controller responds to the selection of the path at the one decision point and provides a next decision point for a subsequent selection of another path. A state of the secondary game remains persistent during repeated plays of the base game so that selected paths in the secondary game are combined to provide non-linear unlocking of a bonus award.

In another example embodiment, a gaming system displays a base game and a secondary game. The base game provides a trigger that provides an opportunity to play the secondary game. The secondary game requires an incremental action to be taken, the incremental action producing a variable result. A state of the secondary game remains persistent during repeated plays of the base game so that the secondary game awards a bonus award based on a plurality of incremental actions. A controller responds to the incremental action in the secondary game and determines the variable result for the incremental action.

Additional aspects of the invention will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art in view of the detailed description of various embodiments, which is made with reference to the drawings, a brief description of which is provided below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a perspective view of a free-standing gaming terminal according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **2** is a schematic view of a gaming system according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **3** is an image of an exemplary basic-game screen of a wagering game displayed on a gaming terminal, according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. **4** is an image of a bonus-game screen of an exemplary wagering game displayed on a gaming terminal, according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. **5-9** illustrate example embodiments where a bonus is incrementally unlocked according to aspects of the present invention.

While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments have been shown by way of example in the drawings and will be described in detail herein. It should be understood, however, that the invention is not intended to be limited to the particular forms disclosed. Rather, the invention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

While this invention is susceptible of embodiment in many different forms, there is shown in the drawings and will herein be described in detail preferred embodiments of the invention with the understanding that the present disclosure is to be considered as an exemplification of the principles of the invention and is not intended to limit the broad aspect of the invention to the embodiments illustrated.

Referring to FIG. **1**, there is shown a gaming terminal **10** similar to those used in gaming establishments, such as casinos. With regard to the present invention, the gaming terminal **10** may be any type of gaming terminal and may have varying structures and methods of operation. For example, in some aspects, the gaming terminal **10** is be an electromechanical gaming terminal configured to play mechanical slots, whereas in other aspects, the gaming terminal is an electronic gaming terminal configured to play a video casino game, such as slots, keno, poker, blackjack, roulette, craps, etc. It should be understood that although the gaming terminal **10** is shown as a free-standing terminal of the upright type, the gaming terminal is readily amenable to implementation in a wide variety of other forms such as a free-standing terminal of the slant-top type, a portable or handheld device primarily used for gaming, such as is disclosed by way of example in PCT Patent Application No. PCT/US2007/000792 filed Jan. 11, 2007, titled "Handheld Device for Wagering Games," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety, a mobile telecommunications device such as a mobile telephone or personal digital assistant (PDA), a counter-top or bar-top gaming terminal, or other personal electronic device, such as a portable television, MP3 player, entertainment device, etcetera.

The gaming terminal **10** illustrated in FIG. **1** comprises a cabinet or housing **12**. For output devices, this embodiment of the gaming terminal **10** includes a primary display area **14**, a secondary display area **16**, and one or more audio speakers **18**. The primary display area **14** and/or secondary display area **16** variously displays information associated with wagering games, non-wagering games, community games, progressives, advertisements, services, premium entertainment, text messaging, emails, alerts or announcements, broadcast information, subscription information, etc. appropriate to the particular mode(s) of operation of the gaming terminal. For input devices, the gaming terminal **10** illustrated in FIG. **1** includes a bill validator **20**, a coin acceptor **22**, one or more information readers **24**, one or more player-input devices **26**, and one or more player-accessible ports **28** (e.g., an audio output jack for headphones, a video headset jack, a wireless transmitter/receiver, etc.). While these typical components found in the gaming terminal **10** are described below, it should be understood that numerous other peripheral devices and other elements exist and are readily utilizable in any number of combinations to create various forms of a gaming terminal in accord with the present concepts.

The primary display area **14** include, in various aspects of the present concepts, a mechanical-reel display, a video display, or a combination thereof in which a transmissive video display is disposed in front of the mechanical-reel display to portray a video image in superposition over the mechanical-reel display. Further information concerning the latter construction is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,517,433 to Loose et al. entitled "Reel Spinning Slot Machine With Superimposed Video Image," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. The video display is, in various embodiments, a cathode ray tube (CRT), a high-resolution liquid crystal display (LCD), a plasma display, a light emitting diode (LED), a DLP projection display, an electroluminescent (EL) panel, or any other type of display suitable for use in the gaming terminal **10**, or other form factor, such as is shown by way of example in FIG. **1**. The primary display area **14** includes, in relation to many aspects of wagering games conducted on the gaming terminal **10**, one or more paylines **30** (see FIG. **3**) extending along a portion of the primary display area. In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. **1**, the primary display area **14** comprises a plurality of mechanical reels **32** and a video display **34**, such as a transmissive display (or a reflected image arrangement in other embodiments), in front of the mechanical reels **32**. If the wagering game conducted via the gaming terminal **10** relies upon the video display **34** only and not the mechanical reels **32**, the mechanical reels **32** are optionally removed from the interior of the terminal and the video display **34** is advantageously of a non-transmissive type. Similarly, if the wagering game conducted via the gaming terminal **10** relies only upon the mechanical reels **32**, but not the video display **34**, the video display **34** depicted in FIG. **1** is replaced with a conventional glass panel. Further, in still other embodiments, the video display **34** is disposed to overlay another video display, rather than a mechanical-reel display, such that the primary display area **14** includes layered or superimposed video displays. In yet other embodiments, the mechanical-reel display of the above-noted embodiments is replaced with another mechanical or physical member or members such as, but not limited to, a mechanical wheel (e.g., a roulette game), dice, a pachinko board, or a diorama presenting a three-dimensional model of a game environment.

Video images in the primary display area **14** and/or the secondary display area **16** are rendered in two-dimensional (e.g., using Flash Macromedia™) or three-dimensional graphics (e.g., using Renderware™). In various aspects, the video images are played back (e.g., from a recording stored on the gaming terminal **10**), streamed (e.g., from a gaming network), or received as a TV signal (e.g., either broadcast or via cable) and such images can take different forms, such as animated images, computer-generated images, or "real-life" images, either prerecorded (e.g., in the case of marketing/promotional material) or as live footage. The format of the video images can include any format including, but not limited to, an analog format, a standard digital format, or a high-definition (HD) digital format.

The player-input or user-input device(s) **26** include, by way of example, a plurality of buttons **36** on a button panel, as shown in FIG. **1**, a mouse, a joy stick, a switch, a microphone, and/or a touch screen **38** mounted over the primary display area **14** and/or the secondary display area **16** and having one or more soft touch keys **40**, as is also shown in FIG. **1**. In still other aspects, the player-input devices **26** comprise technologies that do not rely upon physical contact between the player and the gaming terminal, such as speech-recognition technology, gesture-sensing technology, eye-tracking technology, etc. The player-input or user-input device(s) **26** thus accept(s) player input(s) and transforms the player input(s) to electronic data signals indicative of a player input or inputs corresponding to an enabled feature for such input(s) at a time of activation (e.g., pressing a "Max Bet" button or soft key to indicate a player's desire to place a maximum wager to play the wagering game). The input(s), once transformed into electronic data signals, are output to a CPU or controller **42** (see FIG. **2**) for processing. The electronic data signals are selected from a group consisting essentially of an electrical current, an electrical voltage, an electrical charge, an optical signal, an optical element, a magnetic signal, and a magnetic element.

The information reader **24** (or information reader/writer) is preferably located on the front of the housing **12** and comprises, in at least some forms, a ticket reader, card reader, bar code scanner, wireless transceiver (e.g., RFID, Bluetooth, etc.), biometric reader, or computer-readable-storage-medium interface. As noted, the information reader may comprise a physical and/or electronic writing element to permit writing to a ticket, a card, or computer-readable-storage-medium. The information reader **24** permits information to be transmitted from a portable medium (e.g., ticket, voucher, coupon, casino card, smart card, debit card, credit card, etc.) to the information reader **24** to enable the gaming terminal **10** or associated external system to access an account associated with cashless gaming, to facilitate player tracking or game customization, to retrieve a saved-game state, to store a current-game state, to cause data transfer, and/or to facilitate access to casino services, such as is more fully disclosed, by way of example, in U.S. Patent Publication No. 2003/0045354, published on Mar. 6, 2003, entitled "Portable Data Unit for Communicating With Gaming Machine Over Wireless Link," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. The noted account associated with cashless gaming is, in some aspects of the present concepts, stored at an external system **46** (see FIG. **2**) as more fully disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,280,328 to Holch et al. entitled "Cashless Computerized Video Game System and Method," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety, or is alternatively stored directly on the portable storage medium. Various security protocols or features can be used to enhance security of the portable storage medium. For example, in some aspects, the individual carrying the portable storage medium is required to enter a secondary independent authenticator (e.g., password, PIN number, biometric, etc.) to access the account stored on the portable storage medium.

Turning now to FIG. **2**, the various components of the gaming terminal **10** are controlled by one or more processors (e.g., CPU, distributed processors, etc.) **42**, also referred to herein generally as a controller (e.g., microcontroller, microprocessor, etc.). The controller **42** can include any suitable processor(s), such as an Intel® Pentium processor, Intel® Core 2 Duo processor, AMD Opteron™ processor, or UltraSPARC® processor. By way of example, the controller **42** includes a plurality of microprocessors including a master processor, a slave processor, and a secondary or parallel processor. Controller **42**, as used herein, comprises any combination of hardware, software, and/or firmware disposed in and/or disposed outside of the gaming terminal **10** that is configured to communicate with and/or control the transfer of data between the gaming terminal **10** and a bus, another computer, processor, or device and/or a service and/or a network. The controller **42** comprises one or more controllers or processors and such one or more controllers or processors need not be disposed proximal to one another and may be located in different devices and/or in different locations. For example, a first processor is disposed proximate a user interface device (e.g., a push button panel, a touch screen display, etc.) and a second processor is disposed remotely from the first processor, the first and second processors being electrically connected through a network. As another example, the first processor is disposed in a first enclosure (e.g., a gaming machine) and a second processor is disposed in a second enclosure (e.g., a server) separate from the first enclosure, the first and second processors being communicatively connected through a network. The controller **42** is operable to execute all of the various gaming methods and other processes disclosed herein.

To provide gaming functions, the controller **42** executes one or more game programs comprising machine-executable instructions stored in local and/or remote computer-readable data storage media (e.g., memory **44** or other suitable storage device). The term computer-readable data storage media, or "computer-readable medium," as used herein refers to any media/medium that participates in providing instructions to controller **42** for execution. The computer-readable medium comprises, in at least some exemplary forms, non-volatile media (e.g., optical disks, magnetic disks, etc.), volatile media (e.g., dynamic memory, RAM), and transmission media (e.g., coaxial cables, copper wire, fiber optics, radio frequency (RF) data communication, infrared (IR) data communication, etc). Common forms of computer-readable media include, for example, a hard disk, magnetic tape (or other magnetic medium), a 2-D or 3-D optical disc (e.g., a CD-ROM, DVD, etc.), RAM, PROM, EPROM, FLASH-EPROM, any other memory chip or solid state digital data storage device, a carrier wave, or any other medium from which a computer can read. By way of example, a plurality of storage media or devices are provided, a first storage device being disposed proximate the user interface device and a second storage device being disposed remotely from the first storage device, wherein a network is connected intermediate the first one and second one of the storage devices.

Various forms of computer-readable media may be involved in carrying one or more sequences of one or more instructions to controller **42** for execution. By way of example, the instructions may initially be borne on a data storage device of a remote device (e.g., a remote computer, server, or system). The remote device can load the instructions into its dynamic memory and send the instructions over a telephone line or other communication path using a modem or other communication device appropriate to the communication path. A modem or other communication device local to the gaming machine **10** or to an external system **46** associated with the gaming machine can receive the data on the telephone line or conveyed through the communication path (e.g., via external systems interface **58**) and output the data to a bus, which transmits the data to the system memory **44** associated with the processor **42**, from which system memory the processor retrieves and executes the instructions.

Thus, the controller **42** is able to send and receive data, via carrier signals, through the network(s), network link, and communication interface. The data includes, in various examples, instructions, commands, program code, player data, and game data. As to the game data, in at least some aspects of the present concepts, the controller **42** uses a local random number generator (RNG) to randomly generate a wagering game outcome from a plurality of possible outcomes. Alternatively, the outcome is centrally determined using either an RNG or pooling scheme at a remote controller included, for example, within the external system **46**.

As shown in the example of FIG. **2**, the controller **42** is coupled to the system memory **44**. The system memory **44** is shown to comprise a volatile memory (e.g., a random-access memory (RAM)) and a non-volatile memory (e.g., an EEPROM), but optionally includes multiple RAM and multiple program memories.

As shown in the example of FIG. **2**, the controller **42** is also coupled to a money/credit detector **48**. The money/credit detector **48** is configured to output a signal the controller **42** that money and/or credits have been input via one or more value-input devices, such as the bill validator **20**, coin acceptor **22**, or via other sources, such as a cashless gaming account, etc. The value-input device(s) is integrated with the housing **12** of the gaming terminal **10** and is connected to the remainder of the components of the gaming terminal **10**, as appropriate, via a wired connection, such as I/O **56**, or wireless connection. The money/credit detector **48** detects the input of valid funds into the gaming terminal **10** (e.g., via currency, electronic funds, ticket, card, etc.) via the value-input device(s) and outputs a signal to the controller **42** carrying data regarding the input value of the valid funds. The controller **42** extracts the data from these signals from the money/credit detector **48**, analyzes the associated data, and transforms the data corresponding to the input value into an equivalent credit balance that is available to the player for subsequent wagers on the gaming terminal **10**, such transforming of the data being effected by software, hardware, and/or firmware configured to associate the input value to an equivalent credit value. Where the input value is already in a credit value form, such as in a cashless gaming account having stored therein a credit value, the wager is simply deducted from the available credit balance.

As seen in FIG. **2**, the controller **42** is also connected to, and controls, the primary display area **14**, the player-input device(s) **26**, and a payoff mechanism **50**. The payoff mechanism **50** is operable in response to instructions from the controller **42** to award a payoff to the player in response to certain winning outcomes that occur in the base game, the bonus game(s), or via an external game or event. The payoff is provided in the form of money, credits, redeemable points, advancement within a game, access to special features within a game, services, another exchangeable media, or any combination thereof. Although payoffs may be paid out in coins and/or currency bills, payoffs are alternatively associated with a coded ticket (from a ticket printer **52**), a portable storage medium or device (e.g., a card magnetic strip), or are transferred to or transmitted to a designated player account.

The payoff amounts distributed by the payoff mechanism **50** are determined by one or more pay tables stored in the system memory **44**.

Communications between the controller **42** and both the peripheral components of the gaming terminal **10** and the external system **46** occur through input/output (I/O) circuit **56**, which can include any suitable bus technologies, such as an AGTL+frontside bus and a PCI backside bus. Although the I/O circuit **56** is shown as a single block, it should be appreciated that the I/O circuit **56** alternatively includes a number of different types of I/O circuits. Furthermore, in some embodiments, the components of the gaming terminal **10** can be interconnected according to any suitable interconnection architecture (e.g., directly connected, hypercube, etc.).

The I/O circuit **56** is connected to an external system interface or communication device **58**, which is connected to the external system **46**. The controller **42** communicates with the external system **46** via the external system interface **58** and a communication path (e.g., serial, parallel, IR, RC, 10bT, near field, etc.). The external system **46** includes, in various aspects, a gaming network, other gaming terminals, a gaming server, a remote controller, communications hardware, or a variety of other interfaced systems or components, in any combination. In yet other aspects, the external system **46** may comprise a player's portable electronic device (e.g., cellular phone, electronic wallet, etc.) and the external system interface **58** is configured to facilitate wireless communication and data transfer between the portable electronic device and the controller **42**, such as by a near field communication path operating via magnetic field induction or a frequency-hopping spread spectrum RF signals (e.g., Bluetooth, etc.).

The gaming terminal **10** optionally communicates with external system **46** (in a wired or wireless manner) such that each terminal operates as a "thin client" having relatively less functionality, a "thick client" having relatively more functionality, or with any range of functionality therebetween (e.g., an "intermediate client"). In general, a wagering game includes an RNG for generating a random number, game logic for determining the outcome based on the randomly generated number, and game assets (e.g., art, sound, etc.) for presenting the determined outcome to a player in an audio-visual manner. The RNG, game logic, and game assets are contained within the gaming terminal **10** ("thick client" gaming terminal), the external systems **46** ("thin client" gaming terminal), or are distributed therebetween in any suitable manner ("intermediate client" gaming terminal).

Referring now to FIG. **3**, an image of a basic-game screen **60** adapted to be displayed on the primary display area **14** is illustrated, according to one embodiment of the present invention. A player begins play of a basic wagering game by providing a wager. A player can operate or interact with the wagering game using the one or more player-input devices **26**. The controller **42**, the external system **46**, or both, in alternative embodiments, operate(s) to execute a wagering game program causing the primary display area **14** to display the wagering game that includes a plurality of visual elements.

In accord with various methods of conducting a wagering game on a gaming system in accord with the present concepts, the wagering game includes a game sequence in which a player makes a wager, such as through the money/credit detector **48**, touch screen **38** soft key, button panel, or the like, and a wagering game outcome is associated with the wager. The wagering game outcome is then revealed to the player in due course following initiation of the wagering game. The method comprises the acts of conducting the wagering game using a gaming apparatus, such as the gaming terminal **10** depicted in FIG. **1**, following receipt of an input from the player to initiate the wagering game. The gaming terminal **10** then communicates the wagering game outcome to the player via one or more output devices (e.g., primary display **14**) through the display of information such as, but not limited to, text, graphics, text and graphics, static images, moving images, etc., or any combination thereof. In accord with the method of conducting the wagering game, the controller **42**, which comprises one or more processors, transforms a physical player input, such as a player's pressing of a "Spin Reels" soft key **84** (see FIG. **3**), into an electronic data signal indicative of an instruction relating to the wagering game (e.g., an electronic data signal bearing data on a wager amount).

In the aforementioned method, for each data signal, the controller **42** is configured to processes the electronic data signal, to interpret the data signal (e.g., data signals corresponding to a wager input), and to cause further actions associated with the interpretation of the signal in accord with computer instructions relating to such further actions executed by the controller. As one example, the controller **42** causes the recording of a digital representation of the wager in one or more storage devices (e.g., system memory **44** or a memory associated with an external system **46**), the controller, in accord with associated computer instructions, causing the changing of a state of the data storage device from a first state to a second state. This change in state is, for example, effected by changing a magnetization pattern on a magnetically coated surface of a magnetic storage device or changing a magnetic state of a ferromagnetic surface of a magneto-optical disc storage device, a change in state of transistors or capacitors in a volatile or a non-volatile semiconductor memory (e.g., DRAM), etc.). The noted second state of the data storage device comprises storage in the storage device of data representing the electronic data signal from the controller (e.g., the wager in the present example). As another example, the controller **42** further, in accord with the execution of the instructions relating to the wagering game, causes the primary display **14** or other display device and/or other output device (e.g., speakers, lights, communication device, etc.), to change from a first state to at least a second state, wherein the second state of the primary display comprises a visual representation of the physical player input (e.g., an acknowledgement to a player), information relating to the physical player input (e.g., an indication of the wager amount), a game sequence, an outcome of the game sequence, or any combination thereof, wherein the game sequence in accord with the present concepts comprises acts described herein. The aforementioned executing of computer instructions relating to the wagering game is further conducted in accord with a random outcome (e.g., determined by the RNG) that is used by the controller **42** to determine the outcome of the game sequence, using a game logic for determining the outcome based on the randomly generated number. In at least some aspects, the controller **42** is configured to determine an outcome of the game sequence at least partially in response to the random parameter.

The basic-game screen **60** is displayed on the primary display area **14** or a portion thereof. In FIG. **3**, the basic-game screen **60** portrays a plurality of simulated movable reels **62***a-e*. Alternatively or additionally, the basic-game screen **60** portrays a plurality of mechanical reels or other video or mechanical presentation consistent with the game format and theme. The basic-game screen **60** also advantageously displays one or more game-session meters and various buttons adapted to be actuated by a player.

In the illustrated embodiment of FIG. **3**, the game-session meters include a "credit" meter **64** for displaying a number of

credits available for play on the terminal; a "lines" meter **66** for displaying a number of paylines to be played by a player on the terminal; a "line bet" meter **68** for displaying a number of credits wagered (e.g., from 1 to 5 or more credits) for each of the number of paylines played; a "total bet" meter **70** for displaying a total number of credits wagered for the particular round of wagering; and a "paid" meter **72** for displaying an amount to be awarded based on the results of the particular round's wager. The depicted user-selectable buttons include a "collect" button **74** to collect the credits remaining in the credits meter **64**; a "help" button **76** for viewing instructions on how to play the wagering game; a "pay table" button **78** for viewing a pay table associated with the basic wagering game; a "select lines" button **80** for changing the number of paylines (displayed in the lines meter **66**) a player wishes to play; a "bet per line" button **82** for changing the amount of the wager which is displayed in the line-bet meter **68**; a "spin reels" button **84** for moving the reels **62***a-e*; and a "max bet spin" button **86** for wagering a maximum number of credits and moving the reels **62***a-e* of the basic wagering game. While the gaming terminal **10** allows for these types of player inputs, the present invention does not require them and can be used on gaming terminals having more, less, or different player inputs.

As shown in the example of FIG. **3**, paylines **30** extend from one of the payline indicators **88***a-i* on the left side of the basic-game screen **60** to a corresponding one of the payline indicators **88***a-i* on the right side of the screen **60**. A plurality of symbols **90** is displayed on the plurality of reels **62***a-e* to indicate possible outcomes of the basic wagering game. A winning combination occurs when the displayed symbols **90** correspond to one of the winning symbol combinations listed in a pay table stored in the memory **44** of the terminal **10** or in the external system **46**. The symbols **90** may include any appropriate graphical representation or animation, and may further include a "blank" symbol.

Symbol combinations are evaluated in accord with various schemes such as, but not limited to, "line pays" or "scatter pays." Line pays are evaluated left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top, or any combination thereof by evaluating the number, type, or order of symbols **90** appearing along an activated payline **30**. Scatter pays are evaluated without regard to position or paylines and only require that such combination appears anywhere on the reels **62***a-e*. While an embodiment with nine paylines is shown, a wagering game with no paylines, a single payline, or any plurality of paylines will also work with the present invention. Additionally, though an embodiment with five reels is shown in FIG. **3**, different embodiments of the gaming terminal **10** comprise a greater or lesser number of reels in accordance with the present invention.

Turning now to FIG. **4**, an example of a bonus game to a basic wagering game is illustrated. A bonus-game screen **92** includes an array of markers **94** located in a plurality of columns and rows. The bonus game is entered upon the occurrence of a triggering event, such as the occurrence of a start-bonus game outcome (e.g., symbol trigger, mystery trigger, time-based trigger, etc.) in or during the basic wagering game. Alternatively, any bonus game described herein is able to be deployed as a stand-alone wagering game independent of a basic wagering game.

In the illustrated bonus game of FIG. **4**, a player selects, one at a time, from the array of markers **94** to reveal an associated bonus-game outcome. According to one embodiment of this bonus game, each marker **94** in the array is associated with an award outcome **96** (e.g., credits or other non-negative outcomes) or an end-game outcome **98**. In the illustrated example, a player has selected an award outcome **96** with the player's first two selections (25 credits and 100 credits, respectively). When one or more end-game outcome **98** is selected (as illustrated by the player's third pick), the bonus game is terminated and the accumulated award outcomes **96** are provided to the player.

Therefore, as described previously, a player plays the base game illustrated in FIG. **3**, and with a single play of the base game, the player may achieve one or more winning combinations of symbols along selected paylines **30**. In some embodiments, the base game may also provide the player with an opportunity to play a bonus game to achieve an additional winning outcome. For example, the player may earn the opportunity to play the bonus game shown in FIG. **4** if special bonus symbols appear on the reels **62***a-e* of basic-game screen **60**. In such embodiments, however, the opportunity to play the bonus game can be earned during a single play of the base game. As a result, such embodiments do not provide the player a strong incentive to play the wagering game more than once.

To provide the player with an incentive to continue playing a wagering game, embodiments according to the present invention require the player to play the wagering game a plurality of times to unlock a bonus or other content. For example, the player may earn an opportunity to play a bonus game by playing the game a plurality of times. With each play of a base game, the player is permitted to take one of a plurality of actions required to unlock the bonus or other content incrementally.

FIG. **5** illustrates an image of a game screen **160** corresponding to a game that requires a player to incrementally unlock a bonus. The game screen **160** is adapted to be displayed on a display area of the gaming terminal **10**. In response to a wager and inputs from a player via player-input devices **26**, the controller **42** and/or the external system **46** operate to execute a wagering game program that displays the game screen **160**.

The game screen **160** is used in combination with a basic-game screen, such as the basic-game screen **60** shown in FIG. **3**. Because the basic-game screen is displayed in the primary display area **14**, the game screen **160** shown in FIG. **5** may be correspondingly shown in the secondary display area **16**.

As shown in FIG. **5**, the game screen **160** presents a graphic representation **200** of a bonus. In addition to providing the player with an opportunity to win an award by playing a basic game, the wagering game presents a bonus on the game screen **160** as further incentive to play the wagering game. The bonus, for example, may be an opportunity to play a game, such as the bonus game of FIG. **4**. The bonus representation **200** in FIG. **5** is shown as text. However, the bonus representation **200** may be any combination of text and/or graphics that represent the bonus in a visually appealing manner, especially to attract players to the wagering game.

The game screen **160** presents the bonus representation **200** in a scene that fits a particular theme for the wagering game. For example, the theme may correspond with the story of "The Lord of the Rings," and the bonus representation **200** may be shown in a three-dimensional fantasy scene representing Middle-earth.

As FIG. **5** further illustrates, a wall **210** and a cannon **220** are graphically positioned in front of the bonus representation **200**. In a theme corresponding to "The Lord of the Rings," the wall may resemble a castle wall. In addition, the cannon **220** is also consistent with the theme. The cannon **220** is aimed at the wall **210** and the bonus representation **200**. The cannon **220** fires a cannonball **222** toward the wall **210** and the bonus representation **200**. The wall **210** is positioned between the

cannon **230** and the bonus representation **200** and provides a "protective" barrier for the bonus representation **200**. Accordingly, the cannonball **222** strikes the wall **210**, rather than the bonus representation **200**.

While playing the base game, the player earns opportunities to fire a cannonball **222** at the wall **210**. For example, if the base game employs the basic-game screen **60** of FIG. **3**, the player may earn one or more opportunities to fire the cannon **220** if a particular symbol **90** or combination of symbols **90** appears on the reels **62***a-e*. In one embodiment, the appearance of one combination of symbols **90** may provide the player with one shot of the cannon **220**, while the appearance of another combination of symbols **90** may provide the player with multiple shots of the cannon **220**. In another embodiment, the number of shots of the cannon **220** may be determined by the number of times a particular symbol appears on the reels **62***a-e*.

The base game must be played repeatedly to earn enough opportunities to fire the cannon **220** at the wall **210**. Although the state of the base game may be refreshed with each repeated play, the state of the game in game screen **160** remains persistent as a result of each firing of the cannon **220**, i.e., damage to the wall **210** is allowed to accumulate over multiple plays of the base game.

As shown in FIG. **6**, after the player fires the cannon **220**, the cannonball **222** from the cannon **220** strikes the wall **210** and causes damage to a portion of the wall **210**. The portion of the wall **210** struck by the cannonball **222** may be randomly determined by the controller **42** or may depend on the outcome of the base game, e.g., the symbols **90** appearing on the reels **62***a-e* in the basic-game screen **60** in FIG. **3**. In an alternative embodiment, the player, via player-input devices **26**, may aim the cannon **220** at a selected portion of the wall **210**. This alternative embodiment introduces a skill-based component into the game. In general, the player must fire the cannon **220** multiple times to cause complete damage to the wall **210**. Each strike incrementally breaks the wall **210**.

Graphically, as the wall is damaged by each cannonball **222**, a portion of the wall falls or disappears. In some embodiments, the amount of damage to the wall **210** may be constant with each cannonball **222** striking the wall **210**. In other embodiments, the amount of damage may be variable and/or random with each cannonball **222** striking the wall **210**. Additionally or alternatively, the amount of damage may depend on how the player launches the object at the wall in a skill-based attempt. Additionally or alternatively, the amount of damage may depend on the part of the wall that is hit by the object (e.g., the base of the wall **210** may be damaged less than the top of the wall **210**). Additionally or alternatively, the amount of damage may depend on the number of previous strikes, where the amount of damage accelerates with each strike and/or after a certain number of strikes. Additionally or alternatively, the amount of damage may depend on the time of day, where the rate of damage to the wall is increased to encourage players to play during off-peak times for the gaming machine. Additionally or alternatively, the amount of damage may depend on player status, where the rate of damage is greater for a player of higher status. In special cases, the amount of damage may be, with any given shot, sufficient to unlock the bonus.

FIG. **7** illustrates the wall **210** after it has been sufficiently destroyed by repeated strikes with cannonballs **222**. The player earns the bonus associated with the representation **220** once he or she has fired enough cannonballs **222** at the wall **210** and caused a sufficient amount of damage, e.g., complete destruction. In some embodiments, the number of strikes required to destroy the wall **210** may remain a mystery. Alternatively, the gaming terminal **10** may indicate how many more cannonballs **222** must be fired at the wall to cause it to be sufficiently damaged for awarding the bonus. In further embodiments, the bonus remains a mystery and is revealed only when the player sufficiently destroys the wall **210**. Graphically, as the wall is damaged with each object, a portion of the wall falls or disappears to reveal a corresponding portion of the hidden bonus representation **200**.

In summary, the player is required to play the basic game repeatedly to earn enough shots of the cannon **220** to destroy the wall **210** and earn the bonus. Accordingly, the game screen **160** provides an approach for incrementally unlocking a bonus.

FIG. **8** illustrates a game screen **360** that presents graphic representations of more than one bonus. In particular, a first graphic representation **400** is associated with a bonus A and a second graphic representation **405** is associated with a bonus B. Other embodiments may include additional graphic representations of bonuses. The player may earn the bonus A and/or the bonus B through the game screen **360**. In some embodiments, the player is permitted to earn only one of the bonuses A or B. In other embodiments, the player has the option to collect both bonuses A and B.

With the game screen **360**, one of the bonuses A or B must be selected to determine whether to fire the cannon **420** at the wall **410** or the wall **415**. In some embodiments, the controller **42** may determine the selection, or the selection may depend on the outcome of the basic game, e.g., the symbols **90** appearing on the reels **62***a-e* in the basic-game screen **60** in FIG. **3**. Alternatively, the player may select either bonus A or bonus B and fire the cannon **420** at the corresponding wall **410** or **415**. Once the player makes the selection, the player may be required to exercise skill in aiming the cannon **420** at a selected portion of the wall **410** or **415**, or the controller **42** may determine where the cannonball **422** will strike.

Although the embodiments shown in FIGS. **5-8** illustrate a cannon firing cannonballs at a wall, it is to be understood that other embodiments may present other themes that require the player to take a plurality of actions to gain access to a benefit, such as a bonus. In some embodiments, the wall may be replaced with another type of barrier, such as a door, a force field, etc. In other embodiments, other types of objects, such as rocks, mortar shells, missiles, grenades, bullets, etc., may be directed at the barrier. Moreover, other embodiments allow the player to direct more than one type of object at the wall. The type of object that the player uses may be selected by the controller **42** or the player, or may depend on the outcome of the base game. In addition, the amount of damage to the barrier may be depend on the type of object that strikes the barrier.

Referring to FIG. **9**, another approach for incremental unlocking of a bonus is illustrated. In particular, FIG. **9** illustrates a partial flow chart **500** corresponding to a game that requires a player to select different paths to incrementally unlock a bonus. The game is adapted to be displayed on a display area of the gaming terminal **10**. In response to a wager and inputs from a player via player-input devices **26**, the controller **42** and/or the external system **46** operate to execute a wagering game program that displays the game. The game is used in combination with a basic-game screen, such as the basic-game screen **60** shown in FIG. **3**. Because the basic-game screen is displayed in the primary display area **14**, the game may be correspondingly shown in the secondary display area **16**.

While playing a base game, a player earns opportunities to select a path from a plurality of paths. The paths are graphically represented on a game screen according to a selected

theme for the wagering game. In a game having a theme based on the "Clue" board game, the player may select a room from a plurality of rooms. In a game having a theme based on the story of "Aladdin," the player may select a cave from a plurality of caves. As shown in FIG. **9**, a decision point **502** requires the player to select one of two paths A or B. If the player selects path A, the player is required to select path A**1** or A**2** in the next decision point **504**. However if the player selects path B, the player is required to select path B**1** or B**2** in the next decision point **506**. As FIG. **9** shows further, the player is required to make a plurality of choices between different paths in subsequent decision points **506**, **508**, **510**, and so on. The number of options at each step may vary, e.g., two options are shown in steps **502**, **503**, **504**, and **506**, while three options are shown in steps **508** and **510**. Each path may branch into a plurality of paths. Paths that are available for selection depend on the path(s) previously selected by the player. In addition, as seen in decision step **510**, paths, e.g., path A**2**, may be repeated as options for selection by the player. The plurality of paths may provide a map of varying variety and complexity.

When the player has made a particular combination of choices between paths, he or she earns a bonus. For example, in FIG. **9**, the player earns a bonus **512** when he or she selects the paths A, A**2**, A**3**, and A**6**. In some embodiments, several bonuses of different types are provided and each bonus can be earned by selecting one or more combination of paths. However, the number of paths in the combinations may vary. In FIG. **9**, the bonus **512** is also provided if the player selects the paths A, A**2**, A**3**, A**5**, A**2**, A**3**, and A**6**. In further embodiments, there are no dead ends and the player can always earn a bonus.

The player earns opportunities to select a new path at a next decision point by playing the base game. For example, if the base game employs the basic-game screen **60** of FIG. **3**, the player may earn one or more opportunities to select a path if a particular symbol **90** or combination of symbols **90** appears on the reels **62***a-e*. In one embodiment, the appearance of one combination of symbols **90** may provide the player with an opportunity to select one path at one decision point, while the appearance of another combination of symbols **90** may provide the player with multiple path selections. In another embodiment, the number of opportunities to select a path may be determined by the number of times a particular symbol appears on the reels **62***a-e*.

The base game must be played repeatedly to earn enough opportunities to select enough paths to earn a bonus. Although the state of the base game may be refreshed with each repeated play, the state of the game of FIG. **9** remains persistent so that the path selections over multiple plays of the base game can be combined.

In summary, the player is required to select more than one path to earn a bonus. Accordingly, FIG. **9** provides an example approach for incrementally unlocking a bonus. It is further noted that the resulting paths and combination of paths provide a non-linear approach for incrementally unlocking a bonus.

In general, embodiments of the present invention require a plurality of actions by a player, and each action results in an incremental unlocking of a bonus. As described above, the player is permitted to take an action after achieving an outcome in a base game. Examples of such actions described above include firing a cannon to incrementally damage a wall that keeps a bonus locked or selecting a path to incrementally arrive at a bonus. In another example, a player earns free spins from a base game, and the free spins are used to unlock a bonus incrementally. However, the actions of a player in embodiments are not limited to these examples.

It is contemplated that the player may be required to complete a series or a combination of any type of action to incrementally unlock a bonus.

Some embodiments require the player to play one or more specified types of games. These types of games may be provided:

a. on different gaming machines, e.g., in the same bank;
b. on the same gaming machine in a server based system;
c. on supplemental handheld devices; and/or
d. through an online (Internet) portal/website.

In some embodiments, the types of games employ a different math model.

In further embodiments, the player is required to use player card points to incrementally unlock a bonus. The player card points are earned by different actions, e.g., relating to game play activity.

In other embodiments, the player is required to provide marketing-related information, e.g., name, e-mail address, mailing address, or survey information, to incrementally unlock a bonus.

In yet other embodiments, the player is required to consume casino services, e.g., dine at a restaurant or stay in a room, to incrementally unlock a bonus.

In further embodiments, the player is required to participate in a "scavenger hunt." Collecting each item on the scavenger list incrementally unlocks a bonus.

According to aspects of the present invention, the rate of unlocking may depend on the time of day, where the rate of damage to the wall is increased to encourage players to play during off-peak times. Alternatively or additionally, the rate of unlocking may depend on player status, where the rate of damage is greater for a player of higher status. Alternatively or additionally, the rate of unlocking may depend on other game play statistics, e.g., how long a player has been playing particular game(s), machine(s), etc.

According to aspects of the present invention, the player may play a skill-based event to unlock the bonus/content.

According to aspects of the present invention, something physical may be required to unlock the bonus, such as a player's card, ID, or keychain.

According to aspects of the present invention, one or more players may act together to unlock the bonus/content.

According to aspects of the present invention, a player may trade an opportunity to unlock bonus with another benefit, such as a multiplier.

According to aspects of the present invention, the expected value (EV) may change or remain the same with each unlocking step. In some embodiments, the player moves on to play a game with a more favorable EV, i.e., a higher EV.

Although the embodiments above may describe the incremental unlocking of a bonus. It is understood that embodiments may unlock any type of benefit. In general, embodiments may provide any type of benefit as incentive to play the wagering game. To provide some examples, players may play the wagering game to incrementally unlock:

a. a direct payout;
b. an opportunity to play in a subsequent game, such as the bonus game described above;
c. an opportunity to play a game with a different expected value (EV), i.e., unlock EV;
d. an opportunity to play a game with "power-ups," where volatility is unlocked with multipliers (2×, 3×, 4×, . . .) and a player can play a game at each multiplier with a given volatility (e.g., volatility goes up with greater multipliers);

e. an opportunity to play bonus spins that provide some other benefit (e.g., in a game with an "Aladdin" theme, bonus spins give the player more "magic" to unlock EV);

f. an opportunity to view special content, such as a teaser with a sneak preview of games to come; or

g. a collector's card to earn some other benefit.

Each of these embodiments and obvious variations thereof is contemplated as falling within the spirit and scope of the claimed invention, which is set forth in the following claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. A gaming system comprising:

a credit detector adapted to detect a wager to play a wagering game;

one or more displays adapted to display, in response to the wager, a base game and a secondary game, the base game providing a trigger that provides an opportunity to play the secondary game, the secondary game including a plurality of decision points, each decision point requiring a selection of one of a plurality of paths; and

a controller operative to respond to the selection of the path at the one decision point and provide a next decision point for a subsequent selection of another path, a state of the secondary game remaining persistent during repeated plays of the base game so that selected paths in the secondary game are combined to provide non-linear unlocking condition of a bonus award,

wherein the bonus award is invariably awarded after selection of a random number of paths.

2. The gaming system of claim **1**, wherein the path selected at the one decision point is selected by a player.

3. The gaming system of claim **1**, wherein the plurality of paths at each decision point depends on previously selected paths at previous decision points.

4. The gaming system of claim **1**, wherein the base game provides a randomly determined outcome, the randomly determined outcome of the base game providing an opportunity to play the secondary game and select a path at one of the decision points.

5. A method of conducting a wagering game for a human player, the wagering game including a game sequence in which the player provides an input and a wagering game outcome is determined, the method comprising the acts of:

receiving, via an input device, a wager to play the wagering game;

displaying, on one or more display devices, a base game and a secondary game, the base game providing a trigger that provides an opportunity to play the secondary game, the secondary game including a plurality of decision points, each decision point requiring a selection of one of a plurality of paths; and

using one or more processors to respond to the selection of the path at the one decision point and provide a next decision point for a subsequent selection of another path, a state of the secondary game remaining persistent during repeated plays of the base game so that selected paths in the secondary game are combined to provide non-linear unlocking condition of a bonus award,

wherein the bonus award is invariably awarded after selection of a random number of paths.

6. The method of claim **5**, wherein the path selected at the one decision point is selected by a player.

7. The method of claim **5**, wherein the secondary game provides a plurality of bonus awards, each bonus award being awarded according to one or more corresponding combination of selected paths.

8. A gaming system comprising:

a credit detector adapted to detect a wager to play a wagering game;

one or more displays adapted to display, in response to the wager, a base game and a secondary game, the base game providing a trigger that provides an opportunity to play the secondary game, the secondary game including a plurality of decision points, each decision point requiring a selection of one of a plurality of available options; and

a controller operative to respond to the selection of the option at the one decision point and provide a next decision point for a subsequent selection of another option, a state of the secondary game remaining persistent during repeated plays of the base game so that selected options in the secondary game are combined to provide non-linear unlocking condition of a bonus award,

wherein the bonus award is invariably awarded after selection of a random number of options.

9. The gaming system of claim **8**, wherein the option selected at the one decision point is selected by a player.

10. The gaming system of claim **8**, wherein the option selected at the one decision point comprises a selection of a path.

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